

## VENERATING THE RELICS OF SAINTS



Our Archdiocese is about to host the relics of St John Bosco, which might lead some to ask why the Church maintains the practice of venerating the relics of saints.

First, let's clarify our terms. Relics are physical objects that have a direct association with a saint or with our Lord. They are usually divided into three categories: first-class relics are the body or fragments of the body of a saint, such as pieces of bone or flesh; second-class relics are something that a saint personally owned, such as clothing or a book (or fragments of such items); and third-class relics are items that a saint touched or that have been touched to a saint's relic. In this instance, what we will see is an effigy of St John Bosco's body, within which is encased some of his first-class relics. The Church speaks of *veneration* with respect to relics (rather than *worship*), so as to distinguish the honour paid to the saints from the worship offered to God alone.

To our modern minds, the practice of honouring relics might seem a strange or even bizarre thing to do. And yet, we are all familiar with secular parallels. We can all appreciate why a person might treasure things that belonged to a departed loved one – a piece of clothing, a personal item, a lock of hair, etc. Alternatively, we might collect souvenirs from our travels; fans of a popular athlete or musician might treasure a keepsake from their hero that they have managed to obtain; towns might build monuments to people who have played a significant role in their local history. These secular "relics" remind us of the love shared with departed friends, or of significant moments that we've experienced, or of people whom we admire, and we often treat such items with great care. In a somewhat similar way, the Church treasures the relics of saints, who in their lives were such powerful instruments of God's love. The saints are *our* heroes – role models whom we strive to imitate.

*(Continued over the page)*

More than mere keepsakes or pictures, first-class relics are the actual bodies (or parts of them) in which these men and women lived out their faith in Christ. These are bodies that have been disciplined through fasting and prayer; bodies made weary through ministry to the poor and care for the sick; in some cases, these are bodies tortured and killed in imitation of Christ's ultimate self-sacrifice on the cross; and these are bodies that will be raised again in glory when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

The self-offering at the heart of our faith does not take place in the abstract, but is lived out concretely, in and through the body. And so we honour the bodies of saints as specific locations in which the Holy Spirit has dwelt and worked in such tangible and powerful ways. In the Church's earliest days, the tombs of Christian martyrs were often used as prized altars during the celebration of Mass, and to this day the Church places relics of the saints within every church altar.

In addition to being the best of role models for us, we also believe that the saints are now intimate friends of God in heaven, and as such we can ask them to intercede for us with our heavenly Father. Indeed, many miracles have been attributed to saints' relics over the centuries, echoing the biblical examples of God healing people through the touch of material objects (e.g. 2 Kings 13:20-21, Matt 9:20-22, Acts 5:12-15, Acts 19:11-12). It is important to note, however, that relics are not magic, but simply a means through which God can choose to act to bring about spiritual and sometimes physical healing.

Relics are tangible reminders that heaven is obtainable for us – as long as we strive after the kind of union with God that the saints did. In the presence of saints' relics we recall their holy lives and we pray for the grace to achieve what they've achieved: eternity with God in heaven. In summary, relics remind us of how the saints have co-operated in God's wonderful work of salvation, they prompt us to ask for the prayers of the saints, and they inspire us to seek God's grace to live faithful lives of goodness ourselves.